

A season that springs to life



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It seemed as if the snow would never melt and the chill would never leave. Then my witch hazel signaled that, despite the patches of white stuff, the earth was warming. Soon, purple and yellow crocuses sweetened the still cool days and pale blue *Chionodoxa* peeped out along the path to the front door. Blue and purple *Iris reticulata* offered dainty spots of color on the slope by the koi pond and the first green shoots of the daffodils popped up, bursting from tiny hillocks of brown earth.

Now the earth's transition from chambermaid to Cinderella is almost complete. Rose bushes leaf out along the driveway border and buds swell on the cherry tree that shades the patio. Azaleas are in bloom and peonies are on the way. And the daffodils are in glorious and golden flower —

jump-starts for my flagging spirit as they naturalize in the brush at the rear of my property and congregate joyfully around the front yard. If that's not enough cause for celebrating life, pansies keep on smiling at me, mauve and yellow and blue and purple, their tiny cat faces bright with earthly delight.

And if I need any further proof of the season, the grass is green — not brown nor yellow but green and in need of mowing. Spring is here and so am I — back on this page where I belong.

My presence is, for me and I hope some of you, a rite of spring — one that I longed for with growing need through the gray winter. It is good to be writing again about the garden — a haven that to me is a metaphor for rebirth and revival. It has been that way, as those of you who read me know, ever since the spring eight years ago when I underwent treatment for breast cancer and found hope in my newly planted vegetable and flower garden.

For both gardeners and gardens, May signals a reawakening. Whoever coined the

phrase “the merry month of May” must have been a gardener. Actually it showed up in the 16th century in a poem that was first attributed to William Shakespeare but later credited to a poet named Richard Barnfield, who may or may not have been gay and had what one biographer calls an “obscure though close relationship with Shakespeare.” All I'd like to know is whether the guy had a garden. Otherwise how would he have truly known May is merry?

After all, May is time for sweet woodruff and lilacs and irises and forget-me-nots. Lady's slippers are a perfect fit and flowering trees — crab apples and dogwoods and Japanese cherries — are like party decorations strung along the suburbs. When the petals of my Japanese cherry tree fall

softly to the patio and form a pink coverlet over the unyielding bricks, I wonder whether there may be a design to the universe after all.

An organic gardener once gave my husband a T-shirt that says “compost happens.” It does. So does life. So do gardens. But we have to nurture them.

In May, the garden calls. Suddenly there is so much to do. My beds are already composted and waiting and pea vines are climbing a trellis. Traditionally you're supposed to plant peas on St. Patrick's Day but the ground was a little too wet and cold to work. I didn't put my seeds in till April, but we should be harvesting plump peas before the heat overwhelms them. Any vegetable straight from the garden does wonders for the psyche as well as the appetite, but peas and corn picked the same day are a gardener's soul food.

By May 15, when the danger of frost is finally past, there are annuals to put in and more vegetables to plant. I've gone on record as not being an elitist about impatiens but I think they should be used judiciously. There are so many other annuals out there. Angelonia and scaevola are lovely plants and I've always liked blue salvia, but last season I fell in love with it. I used summer-blooming Victoria Blue throughout the garden, especially to hide the bare legs of my rambler roses and my Casa Blanca lilies.

Other annual joys that I



NEWSDAY FILE PHOTO / TONY JEROME

It's spring, and fallen cherry blossoms make everything they touch beautiful.

hope to repeat include my favorite vines — passion flower and moonflower and morning glory and thunbergia and cobeia, also known as cup and saucer vine because that's exactly what the flowers look like. And mandevilla. Especially hot pink mandevilla, which the oncologist who became my friend told me about in those gone but not forgotten days when I needed all the flowers I could get.

This season, I'm also going to try ornamental hyacinth

beans and introduce some new clematis vines. Clematis comes in lots of shapes and sizes and I'll be writing about it soon. Other recommendations include the portulaca that colored my scraggly mailbox area, the fuzzy silver-leafed *Salvia argentea* that became a conversation piece in the corners of the vegetable beds and the coleus that shone in the shady patio borders. Coleus makes a splash in dazzling combinations, and you shouldn't be afraid to take chances with

foliage.

In fact, you shouldn't be afraid, period. Gardens, as a wise friend told a new columnist years ago, are very forgiving. Plants can be moved and if something doesn't work, you can try again.

I dig my trowel into the ground and the moist, rich soil warms my bare hands and touches my spirit. There are moments when I smile and wipe tears from my eyes at the same time. Spring is here and so am I.